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Operation Kingpin— Success or Failure?

By WILLIAM C. THOMAS

One of the more controversial operations during the Vietnam War did not involve defoliants or bombing remote hamlets; rather it was an attempt to rescue 54 Americans held captive in the north. Operation Kingpin was the raid to retrieve prisoners of war (POWs) from a camp located near Hanoi at a place called Son Tay. This effort is best remembered because the captives had been moved prior to the raid and the camp was found to be empty. But despite failing to accomplish the objective, this mission offers some valuable lessons in jointness.

Kingpin proved that a joint mission could be well planned, trained, and executed—lessons forgotten ten years later in Eagle Claw, the aborted mission to rescue American captives from Iran.

The raid on Son Tay demonstrated that service rivalries could be effectively overcome to organize an appropriate force, sort out equipment interoperability problems, conduct proper training, and complete contingency planning to execute a mission despite the inevitable friction of war.

The Mission

Most American POWs were held in Hanoi, whereas Son Tay was located 23 miles from the North Vietnamese capital. Using various intelligence sources, the United States discovered the site of the camp in May 1970 and identified many of the captives.¹ A plan then was developed to insert 56 members of Special Forces to perform a rescue. They would be delivered at night by Air Force helicopters, spend less than 30 minutes on the ground, and return with the POWs. The mission would involve the coordinated efforts of Air Force and Army special operations units as well as naval aviation forces who conducted a diversionary attack over Hanoi.

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Intelligence assets monitored the camp during the six months of planning and preparation. Reconnaissance indicated it had been emptied but could not confirm this fact by other sources. Photos taken by SR-71s and Buffalo Hunter drones indicated it was vacated sometime after June 6. POWs later reported that they were moved on July 14.² The camp showed signs of limited activity but there was no way of determining if the Americans had returned. Although analysts prefer to have at least two independent sources before relying on information, mission preparations proceeded. However, two days before the raid a source inside the North Vietnamese government indicated that the prisoners had been moved to another camp.³

There remains speculation on why the POWs were moved. Some believe it was because of possible flooding resulting from a CIA operation known as "Popeye" which seeded rain clouds to create adverse weather in North Vietnam. Another possibility is that the camp was under repair or being expanded. The raiders found lumber, cement, and tools. Whatever the reason, the command staff decided to go ahead with the mission, stating that it would be "unforgivable" to not go in after all the training and preparation only to find out later that the POWs had been there.

Special Forces personnel would be transported via Air Force HH-53 and HH-3 helicopters from Udorn with MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft from Takhli serving as pathfinders (see map). Close air support would be provided by A-1 Skyraiders, considered too slow by the conventional Air Force but perfect by air commandos. While the Navy staged a diversionary attack over Hanoi to draw attention from the camp (they had to drop flares since bombing missions over the north were forbidden at this time), helicopters would fly in and deposit the team at Son Tay. The prison assault team, led by Captain Dick Meadows, would crash land inside the prison aboard an HH-3. The small helicopter would be abandoned rather than risk having it shot down while departing and falling on the troops below. As the assault team moved quickly into the cells another group would create an escape route by blowing a hole through the prison wall. A third team would defend the raiders from enemy response. Once the POWs were rounded up the helicopters would return from a nearby landing zone, pick up the raiders and POWs, and return to Thailand. The teams planned to be on the ground no more than 28 minutes (this estimate was off by only 15 seconds).⁴

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Building a Force

Concerns arose during planning for the raid over the size of the force as estimates of 350 personnel were proposed. This was not unusual since the services tend to exaggerate their role by increasing their contributions. In this case, however, planning was done primarily by operators rather than by the Joint Chiefs whose exclusion reduced service parochialism.

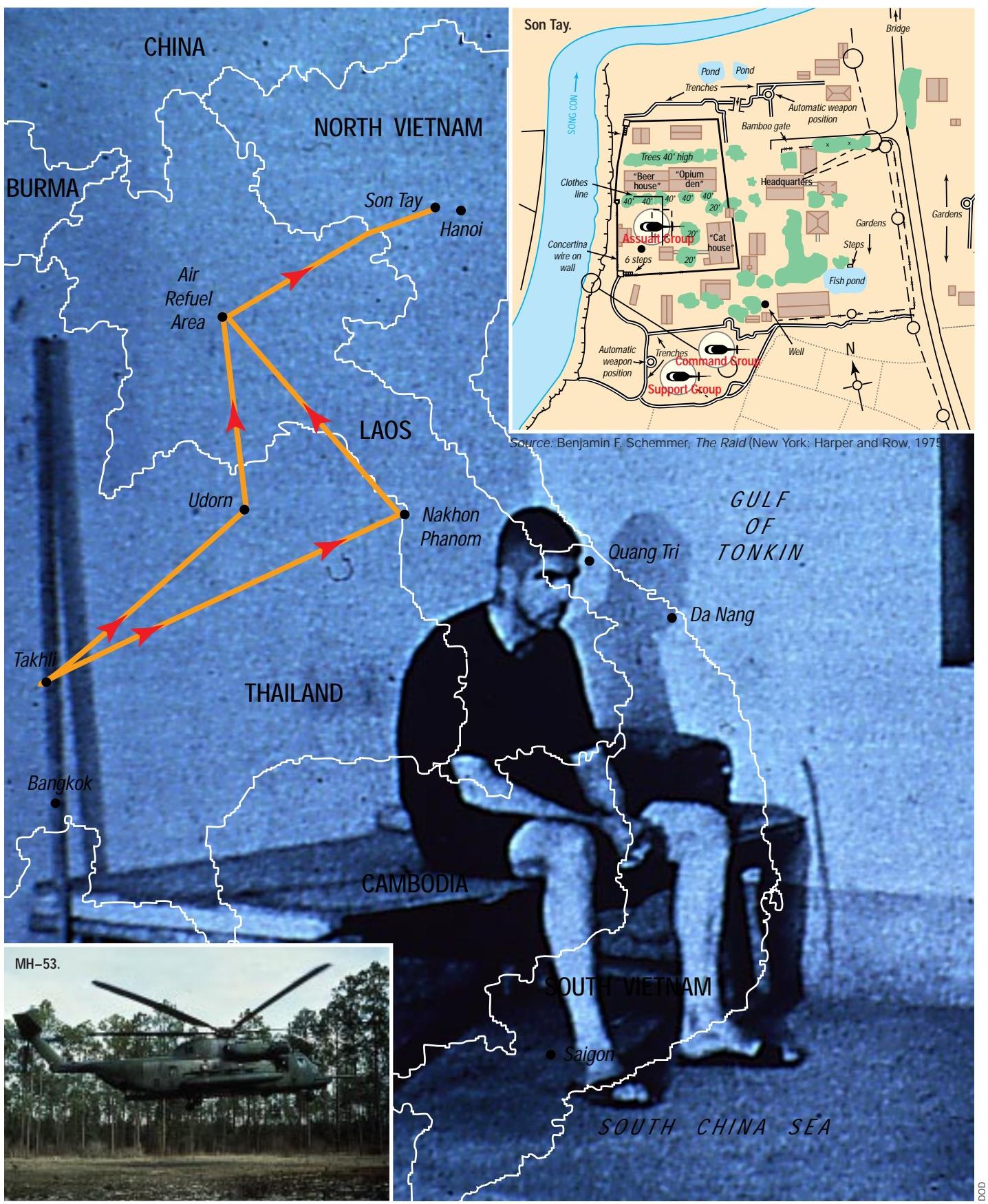
A special operations team of Army and Air Force personnel was formed over Marine Corps objections. Selection was not based on rank or service but rather on experience in Southeast Asia or operational specialty. The Army and Air Force were chosen based on mission needs: the ability to move safely and strike quickly. Special Forces were best suited for the mission, which required a small unit that could discriminately apply concentrated firepower. Air Force special operations pilots had the most experience in low-level night insertion and extraction missions. By combining technical expertise with regional familiarity and not insisting that every service be used the planners developed a force well suited to the objectives.

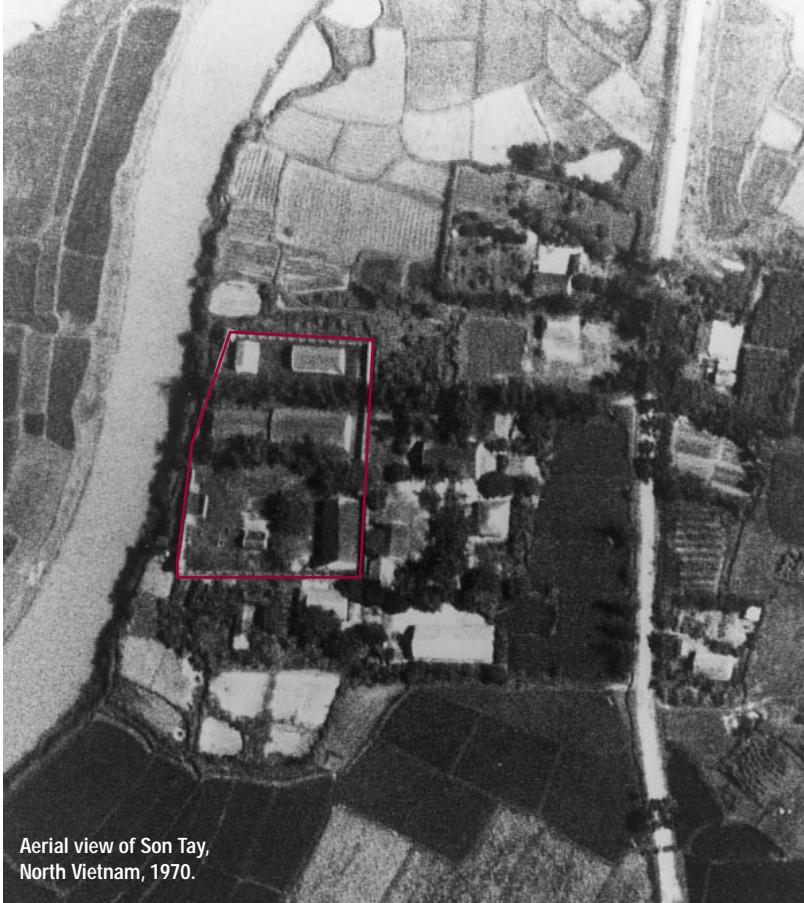
The lesson is that force structure must be determined by mission goals and the constraints inherent in an operation. If that means using every service, then they should be used. If not, don't. Planners court disaster when they cater to the services by enlarging their roles and ultimately their budgets. When JCS planned Eagle Claw ten years later this lesson was forgotten. According to one senior observer, "there was a general feeling that it would be nice if everyone had a piece of the pie."⁵ That general feeling can lead to putting the wrong people into a job.

Interoperability

Today a major problem facing joint operations is interoperability. Too often services find that their equipment is not compatible when they must work together. Each has its own acquisition process even though the Office of the Secretary of Defense compiles a consolidated budget request. Despite the scrutiny provided by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council, the services typically buy equipment only with their own purposes in mind. This will change—but slowly. Meanwhile the services must overcome this problem. Kingpin proved that it can be done.

The most significant problems challenging mission planners involved the resources of only one service. Four types of aircraft were needed in direct support of the ground force. An HH-3 would carry one team while HH-53s took in the remaining Special Forces. Because the helicopters lacked navigation equipment to find Son Tay at night, two MC-130s would serve as pathfinders. Close air support would be provided by A-1s.





Aerial view of Son Tay,
North Vietnam, 1970.

U.S. Air Force



Model of prison used
as training aid.

U.S. Air Force

The problem was speed because the HH-3 was the slowest aircraft. That made it difficult for MC-130s; when flying just over their stall speed they were still ten knots faster than the HH-3. Since MC-130s were navigating for the helicopters, it would not be acceptable for the slowest aircraft to lag behind. A-1s were even faster and would be over the target area long before the raiders arrived thereby increasing their exposure. A way had to be found to keep the aircraft together.

Although some might have proclaimed the obstacle unsolvable and the mission impossible, Kingpin planners recognized that most problems can be overcome through innovation and creative thinking. MC-130s would fly just above their stall speed with the HH-3 "drafting" behind

them. By flying in the slipstream of larger aircraft the HH-3 could gain the ten knots needed to keep up. A-1s would fly large S-turns along the flight path to keep from getting too far ahead. This plan allowed all the aircraft to arrive at Son Tay together.

Despite the fact that the aircraft came from one service the lesson applies to joint operations. Mission requirements will dictate that certain forces be used. They may not be able to immediately integrate. Their equipment may be incompatible or their skills may not be complementary. Instead of making the choice between accepting a bad situation or canceling a mission, planners must find the means to remedy such problems. The answer may be obvious or require innovation, but again this lesson was forgotten in Eagle Claw when an array of forces from all services was employed. They did not have the right radios. Rather than ensuring that the widely dispersed personnel could communicate in a secure fashion, the leadership accepted a bad situation and hoped for the best. It was this lack of communication that contributed to mission failure.

Proper Training

The mission validated the fact that joint training must be accomplished before an operation. It is difficult to train as a single service and then to fight jointly; forces need to train as they fight. Once a plan is developed, if the services train by themselves the required synergy will not be there. Fortunately this was not a problem in Kingpin. The raiding team trained at Eglin Air Force Base using a full-scale mockup of the Son Tay camp built from reconnaissance photos. They ran dry-fire exercises during the day, then at night, followed by daytime live-fire exercises and finally three full rehearsals at night. Helicopter crews practiced with MC-130s and trained at the mockup camp. Over 150 practice sessions were run. Troops thus got used to being a team and better understood the needs and capabilities of other services.

Joint training is critical because each service has needs that can only be met by a supporting service. When the Air Force provides close air support or insertion and extraction for Army units, pilots have to know how the Army fights to support the troops on the ground. On the other hand, if Army planners are depending on Air Force support they must understand Air Force capabilities. Fortunately, the special operators involved in Kingpin had worked with the other services, and the planning staff included both Army and Air Force representatives.

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Eagle Claw planners forgot this critical lesson ten years later. The senior leadership as well as ad hoc units formed for the mission had limited joint experience. In six months of preparations not one rehearsal integrated all task force components. Knowing the capabilities of other services leads to planning that allows various elements to support and complement each other. Moreover, such an awareness coupled with integrated training also enables operators to develop responses to unexpected contingencies. The better the preparation, the better the ability to react if things don't go according to plan.

Preparing for Contingencies

First planned for late October, Kingpin was postponed for a month by the national security adviser to the President, Henry Kissinger. The unexpected delay proved essential for the raiders. With no other taskings and not wanting the team to lose its edge, planners began asking "what if?" It was during this period that they planned and trained for a range of contingencies.

The planners anticipated various possibilities. What if a helicopter was lost? What if North Vietnamese reinforcements arrived? What if the prisoners were unable to walk or were too scared to leave their cells? While it is impossible in such situations to think of everything, operators will at least be in the frame of mind to find a solution when something goes wrong. This turned out to be critical once Kingpin was executed.

The helicopter carrying Colonel Arthur D. ("Bull") Simons, the ground forces commander, accidentally landed at another facility 400 yards away. Realizing he and his 21-man team would be out of action until picked up, he radioed the message "option green" which alerted Meadows, who was inside the camp, that he was now in command. Simons and his team were lifted out after a brief fire fight, but once on the ground at the right place he resumed command. The transfer was seamless and the mission was never disrupted despite briefly losing its commander and nearly half the ground forces. If the raiders had not considered unanticipated problems this incident could have spelled disaster for the entire team.

By contrast Eagle Claw demonstrated what occurs when potential problems are not tackled early on. Rather than devising methods for working around obstacles, the planning staff expected to abort the mission if things went wrong. The use of go/no-go abort points was mandated in the original operational requirements.⁶ Such a fatalistic approach leads operators to focus on halting a mission rather than resolving problems. As it

turned out, the mission was called off when three of eight helicopters were lost because of navigational or mechanical difficulties. The loss of three helicopters was one of the abort thresholds.

The fact that unexpected situations occur highlights the need for effective joint operations. Using two or more services makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. While there may be some redundancy in such operations, this may free up resources from one service, allowing them to be applied elsewhere and thus enhance economy of force and the ability to respond to problems which arise.

Operation Kingpin is a model of joint planning and operations. Its force structure reflected the politico-military objectives of the mission rather than interservice rivalry. Instead of ignoring equipment incompatibilities, planners found ways around them. The services conducted realistic training that allowed them to resolve problems before rather than during the operation. Finally, the raiders were ready for unanticipated issues that arise in all missions. Was the operation successful? If one is asking if it met its objectives the answer is no. Despite intelligence, planning, and training not one POW was rescued. But if one is inquiring whether this was a joint mission that reflects realistic planning, appropriate force structure, quality training, and effective use of ground and air assets, the answer must be an emphatic yes.

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NOTES

¹ Operational aspects are discussed in Benjamin F. Schemmer, *The Raid* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 56.

² Interview with Col Henry P. Fowler, Jr., USAF (Ret.), one of the Son Tay captives, January 29, 1996. Interview with MAJ Richard J. Meadows, USA (Ret.), May 5, 1995. The assault force was led by Meadows, who searched each cell looking for prisoners.

³ Speculation continues over whether human intelligence verified that the prisoners were gone, and senior members of the joint task group refused to either confirm or deny it. Schemmer recounts an exchange which involved the Chairman, ADM Thomas H. Moorer, USN; the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, LTG Donald V. Bennett, USA; and the special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities on the Joint Staff, BG Donald D. Blackburn, USA. According to Schemmer they discussed the recent intelligence and recommended that the mission continue. Other sources also believe that actual verification was received.

⁴ The summary of the plan is consolidated from Benjamin Kraljev, "The Son Tay Raid," *Airlift Operations Review* (January 1981), pp. 27–31, and Schemmer, *The Raid*.

⁵ John E. Valliere, "Disaster at Desert One: Catalyst for Change," *Parameters*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), p. 78.

⁶ Robert L. Earl, "A Matter of Principle," *Proceedings*, vol. 109, no. 2 (February 1983), p. 30.